



How to Conduct an After Action Review

a.k.a.
(The “Hot Wash”)



What is an After Action Review?



- Review conducted after the exercise has concluded
- Presentation and Discussion Format
- Conducted by the Exercise Controller(s)

Instructor's Notes:

- The After Action Review, or “Hot Wash,” occurs immediately after the exercise concludes.
- The format of the Hot Wash is the combination of a presentation of the events and actions taken during the exercise, and a group discussion about those events and actions.
- The exercise controllers should conduct the Hot Wash, as they will have witnessed the evolution of the response actions taken by all the participants and they are privy to the details of the exercise scenario.



Goals of an After Action Review

- Verify that exercise goals were achieved
- Evaluate training and staffing deficiencies
- Evaluate upgrades and corrections to the emergency response (ER) protocols
- Evaluate if additional inter-agency coordination is needed
- Aid in planning future exercises

Instructor Notes:

Trainees must understand that for an emergency response (ER) system to be effective, the personnel, plans, procedures, facilities, and equipment must be “exercised” and tested on a regular basis. For the exercises and tests to be effective, a review must be conducted following each exercise to identify successes and shortfalls.

The after action evaluation serves as the basis for:

- Evaluating if the goals of the exercise were achieved
- Evaluating training and staffing deficiencies
- Evaluating necessary upgrades and corrections to the ER plans, protocols and procedures
- Evaluating if additional inter-agency coordination is required for effective ER
- Planning and upgrading future exercises

Recommendations for improving the ER plans, protocols, procedures and training in the future is the primary reason for conducting the exercise. It is critical that the recommendations that result from the After Action Review be implemented. The recommendations typically derived from emergency response exercises relate to:

- Whether the ER procedures are sound;
- Whether resources are sufficient to support the procedures;
- Whether personnel are adequately trained to use those resources and follow the



Preparing for an After Action Review

What to watch for throughout the exercise:

- Are exercise objectives being met?
- Are participants fulfilling their roles?
- Are participants communicating effectively?

Instructor Notes:

In order to conduct an After Action Review, the controllers must be very observant during the exercise. They must specifically do the following:

- Note if the objectives of the exercise are being met by the participants;
- Determine whether the participants are fulfilling the duties of their assigned roles;
- Determine whether communications between participants are effective;

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Preparing for an After Action Review

What to watch for throughout the exercise:



- How are key events and actions handled?
- Are there any problems with preparedness, procedures, and/or the simulation?

Instructor Notes:

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In order to conduct an After Action Review, the controllers must be very observant during the exercise. Instructors should train controllers to:

- Identify key events and how they were handled by the participants, and
- Identify any problems encountered and their source, including issues related to the ER plan, personnel preparedness and training, and/or the exercise simulation.

Preparing for an After Action Review



After the exercise has concluded:

- The controller or presenter should prepare discussion points using information from evaluation forms (provided on CD)
- Talking points should address the issues witnessed by the controller during the exercise and any lessons learned

Instructor Notes:

•Controllers may wish to partially structure the After Action Review by preparing discussion points in the form of a PowerPoint slide or slides, or notes on a paper flip-chart, blackboard or on transparencies displayed with an overhead projector. This will help guide the discussions and make the review session more efficient.

•The discussion points can be created once the observation process is complete and the exercise concludes. The exercise evaluation forms provided on the CD (the “Evaluator Checklist” and the “Exercise Critique Form”) should be used as a source for discussion points.

•Generally, the discussion points should verify if the participants in the exercise followed the guidance documents related to emergency response, such as the ER plan, or the EPA’s Response Protocol Toolbox.

•In addition, the discussion points should address how effectively the parties involved in the scenario communicated with each other, the public, and the media.

•Also, did the participants work well as a team to resolve the situation?

•And, lastly, the controller should initiate discussions to determine if any “lessons were learned.”



Example Hot Wash Discussion Points

- Were protocols followed?
ER plan, RPTB, ICS, NIMS, NRP, other
- Did the appropriate incident command shifts occur as more information regarding the scenario was revealed?

Instructor Notes:

- This and the following slides are a list of general discussion points that might be used during an After Action Review.
- The controller or facilitator may ask these questions of the participants, make a few statements to respond to the questions him or herself, and then allow the participants to comment on each question and respond based on their own experience as derived from the exercise.
- The questions should aim to discover whether the objectives of the exercise were met.

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NOTE: ER=Emergency Response, RPTB=Response Protocol Toolbox,
ICS=Incident Command System, NRP=National Response Plan and
NIMS=National Incident Management System

Example Hot Wash Discussion Points



- Was the ER chain-of-command adhered to throughout the response?
- Did the exercise adequately test participants' capability to implement their ER plan?

Instructor Notes:

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- This slide lists more discussion points that might be used during an After Action Review.
- The controller or facilitator may ask these questions of the participants, make a few statements to respond to the questions him or herself, and then allow the participants to comment on each question and respond based on their own experience as derived from the exercise.
- The questions should aim to discover whether the objectives of the exercise were met.



After Action Review Tips

- Break after exercise to prepare talking points
- Review and discuss critical communications and actions at the beginning of the review
- Use visual aids to address talking points

Instructor Notes:

This and the following slides outline some tips that should help controllers plan and execute a successful After Action Review. These tips were derived from FEMA exercise design guidance, personal experience, as well as the experience of others who have evaluated similar exercises.

•Controllers should schedule a break between the end of the exercise and the start of the After Action Review presentation. This allows the participants to take a break from the exercise, after having worked under time pressure in a stress-filled environment for several hours during the exercise. The break also allows the controller to review communication cards, exercise evaluation forms and personal notes so that they can create talking points to guide the After Action Review.

•The Hot Wash should highlight the successful communications and actions taken by the participants. It should also bring to light critical protocols, procedures, or notifications that may have been missed, handled improperly, or did not prove adequate for the given situation. The controllers should track the critical interactions throughout the exercise so that they can be addressed during the After Action Review.

•The exercise controllers should use visual aids to address the talking points. For example, to verify if the ER plan was activated properly, a schematic of the command structure might be displayed on a slide to show “who’s in charge” and to demonstrate the critical roles that should have been assigned during the incident.

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After Action Review Tips

- Field as many questions as possible
- Let the discussion points stimulate an exchange among participants
- Make note of post-exercise action items for follow-up

Instructor Notes:

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- Controllers or facilitators should field as many questions from the participants as possible in an effort to stimulate dialogue between the various entities represented in the exercise.

- The Hot Wash talking points will usually stimulate good discussion between the participants. Discussion between the participants should be encouraged. These discussions will offer insight into:

- Whether ER plan and protocols need to be updated or modified;
- How effectively the ER plan and protocols were implemented;
- How effectively the participants communicated; and
- How effectively the exercise was run.

- The after-action review discussions may yield some post-exercise action items. For example, these action items may be changes to the ER plan or protocols, improvements in inter-agency communication strategies, or changes to training methods. Controllers must make note of all post-exercise action items, since it is critical to implement them in a timely manner for the exercise to be successful.

Final Thoughts...



- There is no single, unique correct response to an incident
- The Hot Wash is not a discussion about “the right answer”
- Controllers should remember to:
 1. Observe
 2. Discuss
 3. Make note
 4. Follow up

Instructor Notes:

•Controllers must understand that there is no single, unique response procedure for any individual incident.

•The After Action Review is not meant to provide the participants with “the right answer to the exercise,” but rather to stimulate discussion about the events that transpired throughout the exercise, and to recap the decisions made by each emergency response entity and the appropriateness of those decisions.

•To review, exercise controllers must remember to do the following in order to prepare for and conduct a successful After Action Review:

- Be observant of (and track) the communications and actions taking place during the exercise.
- Prepare talking points to stimulate discussion among the participants to gauge how well the exercise was performed.
- Make note of any ER protocols and procedures that need updating, communications issues, training gaps, problems with the exercise, or any other items of note that require follow up.
- Ensure that follow-up items are addressed very soon after the completion of the exercise.